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Reuters

MOGADISHU, Somalia — United Nations peacekeepers and Somalis traded volleys of gunfire in Mogadishu yesterday as the last major combat unit of U.S. troops waited to board a ship bound for home.

U.S. soldiers assembling at the U.N.-controlled airfield scrambled for cover as shots fired by Somalis whistled overhead and Egyptian guards peppered the streets with return fire.

"It's like San Antonio on a Satur-

day night," said one U.S. soldier, recalling his hometown in Texas.

"You leave Somalia having made a difference here," said Maj. Gen. Thomas Montgomery on a day when Mogadishu seemed as lawless as it had been in December 1992, when American troops landed to try to save Somalis from famine.

"Somalis today have a window of opportunity to bring back some order to a destroyed country and, hopefully, prevent a return to famine," the U.S. commander told 400 soldiers

from the "Triple Deuce" unit of the 10th Mountain Division.

Unconfirmed reports said yesterday's gunfight erupted after several Somalis tried to loot a rival gang's vehicle, but U.N. officials blamed it on a disgruntled Somali who had lost a contract with the world body.

The gunfire rose and fell around the airport for more than an hour, temporarily closing the runway, but did not appear to hit anyone.

Egyptian soldiers based near the city's derelict soap factory, scene of

much fighting between U.N. troops and Somali militia last year, also were fired on.

U.N. officers said Pakistani soldiers killed a Somali when they fired to disperse a group trying to loot a truck that had just crashed into another vehicle.

From a farewell ceremony in an airport hangar scarred by old mortar blasts, U.S. troops moved to the nearby port, where they boarded the ship Mediterranean Sky, which will cast off today.

They were joined by 100 medical workers from the 46th Combat Support Hospital, which treated dozens of American casualties from the Oct. 3 battle in which 18 U.S. soldiers and about 345 Somalis were killed. The battle led to President Clinton's decision to order the withdrawal by March 31 of all U.S. troops.

When the Western force sails, the Somalia peacekeeping mission will be left to an ill-equipped, 20,000-strong U.N. force under Asian and African command.

Three years after guerrillas overthrew dictator Mohamed Siad Barre, Somalia still has no government and is in the thrall of warlord factions whose fighting contributed to famine that killed an estimated 300,000.

Many fear that clan fighting will intensify after thousands of American, German and Italian troops leave by the end of this month.

Clan warfare has erupted in southern Somalia as factions fight for control of the country's meager economic resources.

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